

Against Patriarchy: Self-labelling as a Subversive Tool in Sandra Cisneros' Poetry

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Abstract: The poetry of Mexican-American writer and poet Sandra Cisneros portrays female images that subvert patriarchal norms and is thus often regarded as rebellious and feminist. This paper explores select narrators in Cisneros' poems, who embody three types of women that defy patriarchal ideologies based on analysis of the derogatory self-labelling adopted by these narrators in her poems "Night Madness Poem", "Loose Woman", "The Heart Rounds Up the Usual Suspects", "Extreme Unction", "Love Poem #1", and "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me". By exploring the archetypes of these three types of narrators and analysing the narrators' processes of self-conception, this paper investigates the construction of narrators' self-labelling and elucidates how self-labelling can function as a potent tool against patriarchy.

Keywords: Derogatory self-labelling; Patriarchy; Narrators; Chicana; Sandra Cisneros.

1. Introduction

The established Mexican-American writer Sandra Cisneros emerged as a prominent figure during the US Latina literary boom of the 1980s, a period marked by the flourishing of Chicana literature in opposition to mainstream culture. Growing up as the only daughter among seven children in Chicago's impoverished neighbourhoods, Cisneros witnessed a clash of races, genders, and cultures that later served as inspiration for writing. Her literary explorations of the complex social issues that ethnic minorities in the United States were obliged to confront have garnered her widespread recognition as the first Chicana writer to enter the literary mainstream. Her work, including the widely acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* [1], has been afforded a place in the canon and is now studied in American classrooms as part of efforts to promote cultural diversity and raise awareness of social inequality.

Aside from the popularity of her novels, Cisneros' accomplishment as a poet is also widely recognised. As a pioneer of Chicana feminism, her poetry challenges societal norms through its use of vulgar language, violent depictions, and explicit descriptions that often portray female protagonists free from the expectations that are typically placed upon them by men. While Cisneros' poetry is embraced by American schools, providing students with rich texts that resonate with today's multicultural society through their exuberant imagery [2], it has attracted relatively less attention from the academic community. Her poetry collections *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* [3] and *Loose Woman* [4] share several commonalities, including Mexican exoticism, bilingual expression, allusions, raunchy language, and candid sexuality. Given their distinctively feminist characteristics, research in Chicana literature to date has focused primarily on Chicana female narrators' or characters' bodily and sexual autonomy. Estill's examination of bodily images in Cisneros' work elucidated the influence of race, class, culture, and space on the bodies portrayed in her poems [5]. Meanwhile, Chávez-Silverman [6] focused on themes of love and sexuality in the *Loose Woman* collection, framing Cisneros's self-presentation of Chicana sexuality within the dominant patriarchal and heterosexist discourse.

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Few studies, however, have highlighted the prominent derogatory self-labelling in Cisneros' poems, whereby the poem's narrators tend to assign pejorative labels to themselves, using negative terms such as "beast", "witch", and "brimstone". These self-described depraved female narrators often address themselves in the first person, employing a pattern characterised by "I'm" followed by derogatory adjectives or nouns, thus shaping and foregrounding their unconventional personalities. This confessional tendency is particularly pronounced in the poems "Night Madness Poem", "Loose Woman", "The Heart Rounds Up the Usual Suspects", "Extreme Uncion", "Love Poem #1", and "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me", wherein the narrators' self-stigmatising labels are wielded as potent tools against patriarchy, effectively redefining the image of the feminine.

The aim of this paper is to fill the research gap by incorporating a sociological perspective that focuses on these derogatory labels and delving deeper into the underlying reasons for the implementation of self-labelling in Cisneros' poetry. Additionally, this paper shall explore the effects of these derogatory self-labels to elucidate the mechanisms by which such labelling practices serve as a critical means of resistance against patriarchy.

2. Three Categories of Self-labelling

The formation of the "self" is inextricably linked to one's social environment, and an individual's understanding of themselves is rooted in their interactions with others. Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory holds that individuals formulate a self-image based on their concept of how others view them [7]. The process of establishing self-concept occurs within social contexts that function as looking-glasses, presenting to individuals their social selves. Therefore, when people label themselves, they do so based on external societal judgements and evaluations, meaning that ideology, culture, and social values are more or less mirrored in individuals' self-concepts.

In Cisneros' poetry, many of the narrators are shameless women who contravene social norms and transcend traditional stereotypes. They often embrace with pride labels that are typically regarded as beyond the pale in a patriarchal society. These labels may be grouped into three broad categories: 1) those that describe them as women experiencing insanity; 2) those that depict them as deviant public enemies; and 3) those that present them as wild women with robust sexual appetites.

2.1. Weaponising Hysteria

Cisneros' poems tend to feature the unrestrained ravings of female narrators, who either claim that they are "crazy" or brand themselves as witches. In "Night Madness Poem", the narrator addresses herself using words that would typically be regarded as insulting, such as "crazy lady" and "witch woman".

"I'm the crazy lady they warned you about.
The she of rumor talked about—
and worse, who talks.
...
Swoop circling.
I'm witch woman high
on tobacco and holy water."

The poem "Loose Woman" portrays a similarly unrestrained woman, who claims that "They say I'm a bitch. / Or witch. I've claimed / the same and never winced." Likewise, the narrator of the poem "The Heart Rounds Up the Usual Suspects", highlights her mental instability, as the lines go "I'm loony as a June bride. / Cold as a bruja's tit. / A pathetic bitch".

Madwomen and witches are two archetypes symbolising wildness and misfortune, both of which reflect collective misogyny. Hysteria was long considered to be a disease exclusive to females due to women's alleged tendencies towards excessive emotion and sensitivity. As Esther Fischer-Homberger emphasised that the stereotypical conceptions

of hysteria that have emerged throughout history are embodiments of misogyny [8]. It was not until the feminist revision of the term argued that the term “hysteria” is deployed “as a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex” that hysteria came to be approached from a more scientific standpoint [9].

The figure of the madwoman features prominently in literature, interestingly, even in female writers’ works, and Chicana literature is no exception to this trend. The acclaimed Chicana author Ana Castillo’s novel *So Far from God: A Novel* [10] employs magical realism to tell a story of a mother and four daughters living in a New Mexico village. The sisters in the book are confronted with a series of challenges posed by patriarchal norms and madness is one of their ways of resisting traditional gender roles.

Within the fictitious world crafted by female writers, madness creates a refuge separate from the reality that liberates the female characters by allowing them to engage in behaviours that are typically deemed intolerable and nonconforming to social norms. Their state of mental instability justifies those characters’ deviation from expected gender roles, liberating them from patriarchal oppression [11].

Turning to the archetype of the witch, it is worth noting that the witch can be seen as an extreme extension of hysteria. The undeveloped neuropathology once maintained hysteria in a superstitious light, creating a subtle connection between witches and the condition. Puritanical New England society espoused the perception that women had less control over their emotions and were naturally more likely to practice witchcraft [12]. Throughout the history of witch hunts, the rate of the female accused significantly outweighed that of males. Edward Bever attributed this phenomenon to the prevailing patriarchal and misogynistic values of the time [13].

In reality, men’s actions in labelling women as “mad” or “witches” silence women by undermining their credibility and voices. In denying women the right to subjective participation in discourse, patriarchy imposes structural oppression on them. However, women may reclaim their voices by defiantly speaking out and asserting themselves as women. While their public appearance may portray them as hysterical or mentally ill, their narratives can demonstrate “how they are driven mad by patriarchal ideology” and their exploration of their inner world is also a mirror of oppressed experiences [14]. As insane women often break the stereotypically ideal female image in literature, creating a more inclusive space for women, hysteria—from the woman’s perspective—is “a force capable of demolishing” the patriarchal structure [15].

Narrators of Cisneros’ poetry address themselves as a witch more than once. In the poem “Extreme Unction”, the narrator discusses her views on marriage and husbands in a way that challenges traditional cultural taboos, where she also labels herself as a witch.

“Husband.

Balm for the occasional

itch. But I’m witch now.

Wife makes me wince.”

Feminine images of hysteria and witchcraft are laden with stigmas that derive from the misogynistic tendencies that often prevail in patriarchal societies. Female writers, however, effectively used this stigmatized image in their works, turning it into their own weapon against patriarchy.

Cisneros’ “crazy” narrators first and foremost proclaim their gender to the public to consolidate the subjective position of women in public discourse. Considering that one’s self-concept is influenced by those who surround them, the narrator’s public representation of their self-concept is a reflection of society’s judgement of her, meaning that social norms and values are, to some degree, unveiled in that self-labelling. In other words, Cisneros’ narrators publicly expose society’s patriarchal ideologies. More importantly, in branding themselves as “mad”, they emphasise their rebellious spirit and assert that their “uncontrollable” personality will not conform to patriarchy’s expectations. These labels,

therefore, may be regarded as these women's declarations of their intentions to uproot traditional social norms.

2.2. Deviant rebellion

Cisneros' poems also feature defiant women who categorise themselves as rebels, taking pride in their deviant behaviours. The narrator of Cisneros' poem "Loose Woman" labels herself as "a danger to society", "*la desesperada*" (a female outlaw), and a "most-wanted public enemy". She has no qualms about declaring herself a rebel who operates outside of society's rules, violating laws and subverting order. Most importantly, she "anguish(es) the Pope and make(s) fathers cry".

"I am the woman of myth and bullshit.

...

By all accounts I am
a danger to society.
I'm Pancha Villa.

I break laws,
upset the natural order,
anguish the Pope and make fathers cry.
I am beyond the jaw of law.
I'm *la desesperada*, most-wanted public enemy.

...

In other words, I'm anarchy."

In his work *Outsider: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Howard Becker asserts that the prerequisite for deviance in social groups is the establishment of rules, which are often set and enforced by those who occupy higher social positions and enjoy more power [16]. As such, it is often the case that men make rules by which women must abide and white people impose rules on Black individuals. Deviant behaviours are defined only when rules are applied to specific individuals, and labels are attached to them.

In patriarchal societies, female-perpetrated crime tends to be suppressed, as women are more strictly controlled and given demanding social expectations [17]. The higher morality imposed on women results in fewer female offenders, explaining why male criminals typically outnumber female criminals. Smart interprets this phenomenon as "an extension of the 'normal' feminine gender role" because traditional female socialisation requires women to be docile and submissive [18].

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, second-wave feminism coincided with an increase in female criminality. While no clear evidence supports the direct correlation between the adoption of feminist ideas and criminal behaviours, Adler has argued that the women's liberation movement enhanced women's perceptions of their capabilities, including their ability to engage in criminal behaviours [19]. Female criminality has thus come to be perceived as "an indication of the degree of women's liberation" [18].

Instead of being an obedient woman, the narrator in Cisneros' "Love Poem #1" asserts that "a red flag /woman I am". Even more shameless, the narrator of "Loose Woman" identifies herself as a female lawbreaker, as the lines go "I break laws, /upset the natural order", "I am beyond the jaw of law. / I'm *la desesperada*, most-wanted public enemy". She subverts the ideal image of the submissive woman espoused by the patriarchal society, echoing the trend of increasing crime committed by women following the second wave of feminism. It is also skilfully crafted that the narrator employs the allusion "Pancha Villa" to a historical figure Pancho Villa, who made significant contributions to the Mexican Revolution and became a symbol of resistance against oppression. Most saliently,

the narrator in "Loose Woman" threatens that she "anguish[es] the Pope and make[s] fathers cry", thus directly challenging the patriarchal ideology, given that the Catholic Pope and fathers, in general, epitomise patriarchal institution.

The act of labelling is part of the narrator's self-characterisation as deviant, and so the narrator's attribution of labels to herself amounts to a declaration of her deviance. Her candid statements are essentially an act of making women visible, albeit from a "criminal" perspective, emphasising the potential diversity of the feminine image. In other words, Cisneros' narrator affirms that women need not conform to a patriarchal ideology, presenting more possibilities as to what kinds of women they can be. The rebellious self-claims undermine the established ideology. The narrators first occupy the space of male discourse with female voices and engage in extreme acts to challenge the existing order. When one force is too stubborn, the other must be sufficiently aggressive to challenge the opposing unshakeable power. Lanser indicates that "ideologically oppositional writers might wish to 'maximise' their narratives in order to posit alternative textual ideologies" [20], which explains why the narrators in Cisneros' poems tend to label themselves as rebellious, wild, and deviant as far as possible. In embracing one extreme, society will be more tolerant of milder actions that were previously frowned upon. This is the effect achieved by Cisneros' transgressive and boisterous language.

2.3. *Virginity to Sexuality*

Female sexuality is another prominent theme in Cisneros' poems. Her narrators brand themselves with labels associated with sexual desire without scruples. In "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me", the narrator speaks candidly about desire and sexuality. She states that there is a wicked self in her, who burns with "the holocaust of desire", "the primordial exquisiteness", "corporal and venial sin", and "the original transgression". As a poet of cultural hybridity, Cisneros employs allusions to Mexican and Chicana culture, most notably the mythology of the Aztec civilisation. The "Tlazoltéotl" mentioned in "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me" is an Aztec goddess of filth and sin who symbolised "sexual impurity and sinful behaviour" [21]. Moreover, the narrator addresses herself as "the lust goddess without guilt" and "the delicious debauchery". All of these labels evoke the primitive, instinctive desire that gives rise to human beings' natural sexual impulses.

"I am evil. I am the filth goddess Tlazoltéotl.
I am the swallower of sins.
The lust goddess without guilt.
The delicious debauchery. You bring out
the primordial exquisiteness in me.
The nasty obsession in me.
The corporal and venial sin in me.
The original transgression in me.

Red ocher. Yellow ocher. Indigo. Cochineal.
Piñón. Copal. Sweetgrass. Myrrh.
All you saints, blessed and terrible,
Virgen de Guadalupe, diosa Coatlicue,
I invoke you."

Cisneros' shocking sexual frankness is far from aligned with traditional expectations of femininity. Throughout history, patriarchal societies have placed exceptional value on female virginity. The double standard of the patriarchal ideology forces objectified women to abide by stricter sexual morality. The notion results in women being long plagued by the shackle of virginity. The patriarchal ideology believes that women's value is measured by their "virginity before marriage and piety in motherhood" [22].

After making their transition from virginity to motherhood, mothers are expected to suppress their sexual desires to serve as moral models for their daughters and thereby safeguard and perpetuate patriarchal values; with their sons, mothers are required to be even more asexual to prevent arousing incestuous desires in their sons, to overcome Freud's Oedipus complex [23]. In imposing virginal morality and asexual motherhood on women, patriarchal society consolidates patriarchal institutions by exerting greater moral control over women [24]. As virginity and purity have come to symbolise ideal womanhood, violating them is configured as a sin, contributing to the ongoing "slut shaming" culture.

Similar to the hysterical imagery, Chicana writers often integrate traditionally stigmatised erotic elements into their works. Traditional Latin American culture tends to portray women in alignment with one of two extremes: as either the pure, virtuous woman or the vicious, filthy *femme fatale* [21]. This dichotomy is commonly referred to as the "Virgin-Whore Dichotomy" [25], with two goddesses in Chicana culture —La Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin of Guadalupe) and La Malinche— respectively symbolising "a spiritually pure mother and a physically defiled concubine" [26]. The Virgin of Guadalupe, a symbol of maternal trait and virginity, is often held up as a role model for women who are expected to grow up to be pure and good mothers [27].

Women's sexuality is thus suppressed, and the requirement that they be pure is not limited to the real world but also pervades their written discourse. Traditionally, female narratives were subject to masculine norms and were required to align with the so-called "women's language", which is tentative and euphemistic [20]. Considering that women's candid treatments of their sexual experiences by no means conform to their expected gender roles, feminist writers assert their subjectivity in their sexual experiences and discourse as a means of transgressing patriarchal boundaries and subverting their constructed passive sexuality [24].

Feminist writers strive to liberate their female sexuality through taboo themes by casting themselves as agents of sexual transformation. Their active role in sexual discourse empowers women to regain their sexual and discursive subjectivity from their submissive sexual objectivity, as constructed by the male gaze, thus challenging male-dominated interpretations. Sexually liberated narratives have been adopted by many feminist writers, including Chicana feminist writers, with the aim of challenging patriarchal norms. In Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* [27], Teresa, for instance, shares her sexual dream with Alicia in her letter. The articulation of topics concerning female sexuality asserts sexual autonomy and subverts the convention that women are required to suppress their desires. The violation of taboos liberates women from patriarchal oppression, allowing them to embrace their natural desires, and redefine women's gender roles.

The narrator in "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me" portrays herself as erotic and openly describes her sexual desires. After a few lines of erotic self-labelling, the narrator suddenly turns to invoke the Virgin of Guadalupe. Consequently, a subtle connection is forged between sexuality and the symbolic combination of virginity and motherhood. Freeing the role models to which Chicana women are expected to aspire from sexual repression constitutes an attempt to liberate Mexican women from patriarchal norms. A similar oxymoron can be found in her "Love Poem #1", the narrator of which acknowledges that "I a wicked nun". The juxtaposition of the binary opposition represents the narrator's defiance of patriarchal institutions and the traditional cultural taboo.

3. Conclusion

As this analysis of Cisneros' poems has demonstrated, her narrators tend to embrace derogatory labels to portray themselves as rebellious women who operate outside patriarchal conventions. These narrators' images fall into three main categories: the mad-woman, the female outlaw, and the sexually liberated woman. However, it is important to note that one can only shape one's "looking-glass self" through the external "other" —

that is, self-labelling is partially informed by societal judgement, which entails several complex social norms, values, and ideologies. Therefore, the three female images established by means of derogatory self-labelling in Cisneros' poems, in fact, mirror the underlying social ideology.

Exploration of the archetypes behind these labels can expose the misogyny of patriarchal ideology. The figures of the madwoman and the witch echo the gendered accusations of hysteria that have been levelled at women for centuries; the social rebel mounts a protest against expectations of female submissiveness; and the sexually liberated woman challenges the repression of female sexuality.

The act of self-labelling, particularly when gender is highlighted, allows women to reclaim their voices in public discourse and—to some extent—to regain their subjective status. By portraying the above three types of female images that deviate from patriarchal expectations, Cisneros' poetry serves as a powerful weapon with which patriarchal institutions may be demolished. Her narrators go beyond exposing the yoke of patriarchy, maximising their languages to protest the entrenched patriarchal ideology.

In addition to serving as a mirror of social values, the derogatory self-labelling in Cisneros' poems serves as an embodiment of the rebellious spirit and as a medium for constructing women's own identity. Overall, the prominent self-labelling in Cisneros' poetry highlights women's struggles against patriarchal oppression.

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